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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom at present, there is a rift between leading authorities who stress the use of oral language in helping children learn to read and those who focus directly on the teaching of reading and writing. This paper identifies five phases in educational development from 1870 to the present; for each phase, indication is given of the significant features or events that have contributed to the present controversy. The paper then considers the following controversial issues, which are current sources of confusion for British school teachers: how to deal with linguistic differences among children, whether to use an oral language base for literacy acquisition, and how to organize the school and the classroom. The final section of the paper discusses proposals that, if implemented, may heal the damaging effects of the rift between leading authorities. (GW)

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INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

FIRST REGIONAL EUROPEAN STUDY CONFERENCE ON READING

Beaumont-sur-Oise, France, 13th-15th April, 1977

"LEARNING TO READ: THEORIES, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN EUROPE"

First Plenary Session: "DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE AND READING"
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In the United Kingdom, education is now a major political issue largely because of the unhealthy state of the British economy. So much so that, in a broadcast speech last October, the Prime Minister instigated what is known as the 'great education debate'. He pointed out that, as future prosperity depends on industrial production, our educational system must justify its large share of public expenditure by doing much more than in the past to meet the needs of industry for well-equipped personnel. In particular, he stressed that, whatever else state schools aim to achieve, they must primarily ensure that all 'normal' pupils master the basic skills of literacy and numeracy.

As the 'great education debate' continues, the mass media reveal the specific issues about which there is a consensus or, more frequently, a clash of opinion between and among politicians, industrialists, educationists, parents, students and so on. Undoubtedly, there is widespread concern about standards, especially in reading, and, hence, strong public support for the Prime Minister's view that, in schools, priority should be given to the acquisition of literacy. At the same time, this priority, with its manifold implications, is clearly a subject

CS 003 678

2

of heated controversy among leading members of the teaching profession and others involved in educational provision. What is more, recent publications indicate that authorities in the field of language and literacy disagree about the relative importance of each of the language arts. Some stress reading more than writing in literacy acquisition and vice-versa. Others place greater emphasis on developing children's oral language per se, as a prerequisite for learning to read, and for further reading progress.

Of course, differences in emphasis on the development of language and reading are to be expected inasmuch as, among recognised authorities, there is a wide variety of practical expertise, research experience, academic knowledge and personal interests. Nevertheless, such differences in emphasis can and do constitute an impediment to raising linguistic standards by creating confusion among school teachers who listen to them being aired at conferences and courses. Even more disastrous are the effects on teachers' morale when reputable lecturers and educational writers clearly espouse contradictory theories and advocate opposing classroom practices. For instance, it was recently drawn to my attention, as an independent adviser, that a group of London primary school teachers were exceedingly perplexed, disillusioned, and generally angry about time wasted after attending short in-service courses at two different teachers' centres. At the first one, they were strongly advised to adopt a sub-skills approach to the complex task of developing children's reading ability. Whereas, at the second centre, the principal lecturer poured scorn on such advice, and dogmatically asserted that a sub-skills approach is not only reactionary, but contrary to up-to-date knowledge of the reading process in particular and linguistic processes in general. Accordingly, he tried to convince even the more experienced teachers in the group that, unless they adopted a holistic approach, they would prevent their pupils from appreciating the essential meaning-deriving aspects of reading.

3

This is but one example of the consequences of what I can perhaps best describe as a damaging 'rift' between leading authorities who propagate distinctly different views on language and reading development, at least in the eyes of their followers. Its origins lie in inadequate scholarly analysis, insufficient relevant experience in the classroom, and an inability or unwillingness to sift and synthesize knowledge from varied sources. There is also reason to believe that preferences for particular theories and misinterpretations of them reflect the personalities and politics of their exponents.

The 'Rift' in Broad Historical Perspective

Be that as it may, the 'rift' amongst British authorities has most obviously grown as a result of divergent educational developments over the years. Therefore, to highlight reasons for some controversial issues about language and reading development, it would seem appropriate initially to set the topic in broad historical perspective. Accordingly, I identify five phases and, for each of them, give a very brief indication of the significant features and/or events which have contributed to what I fear is a widening 'rift' between leading authorities with little prospect of it being healed in the near future.

Phase I

From the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1870 until the late 1920s, teachers focused much of their attention on developing the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Reading was generally acknowledged to be the 'first R', but in the 1930s the ideas of Decroly, Dewey and Froebel began to have an increasing influence on educational practice. In consequence, by the outbreak of World War II, reading had come to be regarded as an integral but relatively small part of a child's total growth.

Phase II

Right up to the late 1950s, in educational circles, it was considered reactionary to discuss reading outside the context of child development.

4

Reading as a long-term, developmental process was not acknowledged except by a few specialists, and it had virtually no status as a subject for academic study largely because of its association with teaching infants and older, backward pupils.

Phase III

As I have described in some detail elsewhere (Parris 1972), there were many significant developments in the 1960s, but I shall mention only four of those which contributed most to the 'rift' between leading British authorities, and to the different emphases now placed on each of the language arts.

First of all, a small group of us decided to try and raise the status of reading to that of a recognised academic discipline. This was because we were convinced, from our research experience, that such status is vitally necessary to bring about improvements in training teachers to teach reading and, hence, in classroom practice. We founded the United Kingdom Reading Association (U.K.R.A.), and set about gaining acceptance for the concept of reading as a long-term, developmental process. Among other things, we also seized every opportunity to draw attention to our proposals to the government for the establishment of a national reading (or 'language arts') centre in each country of the United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, another group of concerned professionals was busy establishing the National Association for the Teaching of English (N.A.T.E.). The expertise of its membership is mainly in English literature and creative writing at the secondary and further education levels. It would seem, therefore, that N.A.T.E. complements U.K.R.A. and, together, the two associations cover all major aspects of literacy and its application in the content fields. Yet, those of us who belong to both associations, and study their respective publications, are very much aware of marked differences between them in the

predominant beliefs, attitudes and objectives expressed, as well as the theories espoused and the practices advocated. But more about that later

Returning to the 1960s and the third and fourth significant developments in that decade I have ~~very~~ space to mention, the attention focused on literacy caused some academics to complain that studies of children's oral language were being neglected. Accordingly, pressure for the necessary financial resources was exerted with satisfactory results, and, for example, the Oracy Research Unit was established at Birmingham University.

Bearing this in mind, it is logical that the fourth development should be the increasing influence of applied linguistics in the reading field, and the gradual acceptance by schoolteachers of the primacy of speech.

Phase IV

By 1970, research in all the language arts was being conducted zealously. But, it was a report called The Trend of Reading Standards (Start and Wells 1972) which aroused public concern and, in the corridors of power, sparked off the most significant development to date. This was the setting up, in 1972, of a Committee of Inquiry under Sir (now Lord) ^{Alan} Bullock 'to inquire into the teaching in the schools of reading and the other uses of English.'

The findings and recommendations of that inquiry were published two years ago in a 609 page volume called A Language for Life (D.E.S. 1975), but better known as the 'Bullock Report'. As will be seen, its content reflects the developments of the previous decade by covering not just reading but all the language arts and much more. Indeed, it is mainly because of those developments that the Bullock Committee extended its brief beyond reading.

/Phase V

We now come to the fifth and current phase which is that of the Bullock Report's appraisal. Here we have evidence for all to see of the 'rift' which has grown between British authorities and their followers, especially since the early 1960s.

First of all, it is significant that a member of the Bullock Committee added a note of dissent in the Report to some of its conclusions. This includes his belief that the Committee is in error in putting undue emphasis upon talking as a means of learning language. In his view, 'one of the causes of the decline in English standards today is the recent drift in schools away from the written to the spoken language'. Moreover, he fully agrees with the cynic who 'may well see the modern trend to use the spoken language in teaching English, rather than reading and writing, as an implied failure of our educational system to teach reading adequately'.

That dissenting member of the Bullock Committee has already received a good deal of support for his views from the general public and from teachers. But certainly not from Professor Rosen of London University, who is a leading member of N.A.T.E., and definitely on the other side of the 'rift'. In a recent editorial to some appraisals of the Bullock Report (Rosen 1975), he congratulates the Committee for not being stampeded into a report with a narrow focus on reading, and actually seems to begrudge the fact that, in his estimation, 'almost a quarter of the Report is devoted to aspects of literacy'. He also states, and I quote at some length:-

'It is not difficult to detect behind the Report's fair and mostly dispassionate tones the fact that in matters of language and the teaching of English in particular the battle-lines have been drawn. However faint they may seem, there is no doubt that the fiercest debates are between those who believe in carefully constructed linear programmes, buttressed by claims for sequence, system and

/structure,

7

structure, and those who believe that development in language can only be achieved by working in a much more flexible and open-ended way. Both these two schools of thought may be said to have received a generous hearing in the Report. Arithmetically perhaps. But it's not as simple as that. If you wish to display a programme-centred approach, then all that is required is lists with explication of the items of your programme. The alternative way, when its principles are asserted, is unlikely to convince any but the three-quarters converted. It takes its greatest force from detailed description of the process at work, from ceaseless educational biography. It needs presenting in another manner.'

Clearly, Professor Rosen and his team of reviewers are not satisfied with the manner in which the Bullock Report presents their 'alternative way'. So they set out to clarify matters, especially for the sake of young teachers who are acknowledged to be often bewildered and dismayed.

Some Controversial Issues

Unfortunately, as I indicated earlier, it is not only young teachers who are bewildered and dismayed by alternative ways for developing language and literacy. There are some controversial issues which perplex even the most experienced members of the teaching profession, and about which they can and do look for guidance in the Bullock Report. However, this is not always forthcoming because the Report tends to describe rather than prescribe with regard to certain types of issue and, in doing so, unintentionally increases conflict by presenting contradictory principles.

In the circumstances, I should now like to draw attention briefly to a few controversial issues of importance which, to my knowledge, are a current source of confusion among British teachers who enjoy an unusual degree of autonomy and, hence, have to make their own professional decisions. These issues are 'specific', in contrast to the broader issues previously mentioned to illustrate the 'rift' between leading

authorities on matters of educational theory and practice. Moreover, they each have linguistic, psychological, pedagogical and political aspects, though ~~some~~ space does not permit every aspect to be mentioned.

Linguistic Differences

Nowadays, great stress is laid on developing children's oral language, but what British teachers should do about linguistic differences is very much a controversial issue. Leaving aside the question of non-English-speaking immigrants, expert opinion seems to be divided about dialects and, especially, about the creole dialect spoken by West Indian pupils. Some say that, because a child's speech is a very personal matter, one shouldn't attempt to alter it to conform to standard English. Others advocate helping children to realise that, particularly in this television age, everybody should be able to understand other dialects and, preferably, to use the form of English acceptable to the international community of educated users.

With regard to class differences in language usage, style and content, authorities generally agree that lower working-class children should be helped to acquire the appropriate language base for their essential literacy even though some alienation from their backgrounds might ensue. However, they are divided as to how this should be achieved. There is resistance to structured approaches like those of Bereiter and Engelmann (1966). Yet, as indicated by recent research (Thomas 1973), traditional nursery methods of child-initiated activity may not necessarily promote language development.

Literacy Acquisition

Undoubtedly, it is important for teachers to develop children's oral language per se. It is also advantageous if they employ language-experience approaches to literacy, as recommended by the Bullock Report, because such approaches give children an insight into some purposes of written language and its relationship to spoken language. However, it

is highly debatable whether children's oracy should be used as the main resource for their acquisition of literacy beyond the introductory stage. Apart from problems of dialect mismatch which affect all pupils (though research needs to be more broadly-based to tell us precisely how), there are very important differences between speech and writing to be taken into account. Moreover, research has not yet defined the critically-needed competencies in oracy for success in reading at various developmental stages, and for different purposes as in the content fields.

Related to this question of an oral-language base for literacy acquisition is controversy arising from what, elsewhere (Morris 1977), I have described as 'current popular mythology about a single entity called natural language.' To my knowledge, this had led English teachers to look for what are sometimes advertised as 'natural language texts' for teaching beginning reading, - a misnomer to say the least! More serious, it has encouraged them to criticise unduly and, even to reject, basal texts with sound didactic purposes on the grounds that their language is 'contrived', not realising, of course, that all published materials are 'contrived', and none more so than those which claim to incorporate children's 'natural' speech patterns.

Organisation

Amongst other controversies, some of the most highly-charged centre around the topic of school and class organisation. At present, concerned attention is focused on mixed-ability classes in comprehensive schools where non-readers work alongside potential university students. Meanwhile, supporters of open-plan schools are finding it difficult to refute the charge that the noise and other distractions characteristic of them are impeding children's progress towards oracy and literacy.

Undoubtedly, teachers who operate an integrated day can make reading and writing meaningful activities within a complex of interesting, learning experiences. But, they are constantly reminded that success in the acquisition of literacy depends a great deal on them being good

10
organizers with clear objectives and a diagnostic, systematic approach for each child.

Likewise, team teaching, when properly planned and executed, ensures that the most experienced teachers can assist the children whose needs are greatest, whether they be slow or fast learners. Here, of course, it is vital to have a consensus of opinion about aims and how they are to be executed. Yet, this is easier said than done, as illustrated by the fact that local education authorities have considered it necessary to issue guidelines to help their teachers implement the Bullock Report's recommendation for a 'language policy across the curriculum.'

The Way Ahead

Certainly, British teachers need all the help they can get, for the educational system is in a state of flux, and, as mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister has indicated that they are expected to contribute a good deal to the nation's future prosperity. Standards of literacy must be raised and adult illiteracy eradicated. To ensure universal mastery of the basic skills, there is even talk of a government-imposed, 'common core curriculum'. What is more, teachers will have to get used to the idea of accountability, and accept closer scrutiny of their work.

Bearing all this in mind, it is particularly regrettable that action on the Bullock Report's recommendations with financial implications has to be postponed until the economic situation improves. What a difference it would make if at least the Report's last major recommendation could be implemented soon! This echoes the proposal some of us made to the government years ago in that it states:-

'There should be a national centre for language in education, concerned with the teaching of English in all its aspects, from language and reading in the early years to advanced studies with sixth forms.'

Such a centre could do so much to settle the controversies and to heal the damaging rift between leading authorities to which I have drawn

attention. However, as it is not yet to be, we must rely on a less expensive way of ensuring that the development of language and reading is not impeded. In short, we must improve the training of teachers so that, instead of being bewildered and dismayed by conflicting theories and practices, they are in a position to make informed judgements about them and, indeed, about all important issues concerning the development of language and reading.

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